

Communications Frontiers of the Future

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Abstract

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Address

Communications Frontiers of the Future

John McClung

As we meet here in Alaska, America's last frontier, let's think for a moment about some communications frontiers our nation has pioneered:

- On Christmas Eve, 1906, Reginald Fessenden made the world's first radio broadcast to startled wireless operators within 15 miles of his Massachusetts coast transmitter.
- On December 7, 1941, the Columbia Broadcasting System presented the first television newscast, reporting the events at Pearl Harbor.
- On February 7, 1984, TV viewers saw a first, thanks to satellite communications technology. Two U.S. astronauts flew freely in space, untethered to their spacecraft and propelled only by backpack jets.
- On June 19, 1985, USDA broadcast from its TV studio in Washington a live 40-minute news conference featuring Secretary Jack Block and four former secretaries: Butz, Bergland, Hardin, and Freeman.

John McClung, director of USDA's Office of Information, gave these remarks as part of the opening session of the 1985 National ACE Conference in Fairbanks, Alaska, last June.

These milestones and many more have made us what we are today: A nation that thrives on communication. Early this year, the Electronic Industries Association reported that 98 percent of U.S. households had at least one television set and one radio. And that's not all: 24 percent had video games; 13 percent had video cassette recorders; 10 percent had home computers; 9 percent had cordless telephones; and 4 percent had telephone answering machines. This is also a nation where, every day, over 62.5 million newspapers are printed on some 23,000 tons of newsprint.

Of course, communication does not rely solely on technology. Along with Hal Taylor and me, some 100,000 other Americans are taking their turns at the soapbox today and every day. No matter what the changes in technology, the human element of communication is here to stay.

Each one of us here is on the precipice of a whole new frontier in agricultural communication—a frontier bordered by: a massive national budget deficit; a cutthroat global economy; flagging farm export sales; failing—and expensive—agricultural policies; breakneck changes in science and technology; and cutbacks in information program spending.

It will take clear eyes and steady hands to steer our way along the brink. It will take a great deal of courage and determination, too. But there's one thing about pioneers: they love the challenge. What others see as impediments, they see as opportunities. What others see as failures, they see as experience.

As American inventor Charles Kettering once wrote: "Where there is an open mind, there will always be a frontier." And I'll take the liberty of adding; Where there is a frontier in agricultural communications, there will always be communicators ready, willing, and able to conquer it.

The frontier I'd like to describe in these remarks is essentially the future of agriculture. Agriculture's future depends on a combination of many factors. Yet, even with all of these, there is one additional thing it cannot do without, and that's information. It's no secret to anyone that farmers are going through difficult times. Those farmers that will succeed and hopefully prosper will do so because they have been able to learn about the changing environment and modify their operations accordingly. They very desperately need information from us—accurate and up-to-date information—so they can be competitive and productive today and in years to come.

Let's take a closer look at the other factors that impinge on the future of agriculture. And let's consider how they affect us—and, more importantly—how we can affect them.

First, the national budget deficit. It is massive, and it's a threat to our nation's future. It's a complicated problem resulting from a simple cause: too much government spending. And the problem is much larger than it appears, because when we're gone, our children and grandchildren will be holding the tab. As some wags have said, it's like robbing piggybanks. Maybe you've seen a recent ad on TV that shows newborns in a hospital nursery. The kicker is, each child has come into this world with an inherited debt of \$55,000. By attacking the deficit we'll also see interest rates start to go down. For farmers, a 1 percent change in interest rates on all farm debt would currently translate into a \$2 to \$3 billion change in net income. That's a lot of bucks.

An effort that goes hand-in-hand with deficit control is tax reform. The President's tax reform program would benefit many American farmers by lowering tax rates, increasing personal exemptions, and reducing incentives for "tax-loss" farming.

But agriculture's changes extend far beyond America's shores. Today, agriculture is a global industry. It is part of a complex, intensely competitive international marketplace—a marketplace where we are steadily losing ground. There are several reasons for this—the overvalued dollar and our rigid farm policies, to name two. But a large portion of the blame must be laid to some of our trade competitors, who levy unfair subsidies and erect barriers to trade. That's why Secretary Block recently instituted a new, aggressive plan to fight back: the export enhancement program, sometimes called export PIK. The program is geared to enhancing additional U.S. sales overseas, and it will be targeted especially to markets that have been taken away from us through unfair trading practices by other exporters. It won't be a cure-all, and it's not without risks. But it is one part of an overall plan to push U.S. agriculture over the new frontier to renewed prosperity and strength.

I spoke before about the federal deficit and rampant government spending. Let me give you one example of that. In just 5 years, the federal government has fed \$63 billion into a gluttonous agricultural economy. The problem is,

agriculture has a hollow leg; despite all that money, farmers are not better off, nor is agribusiness.

I'm not going to stand here and say that the government has no role in agriculture. Because it most assuredly does. But the money funnelled into that industry should be exceedingly well spent. Farming is, when all is said and done, a business. The government can help farmers pursue that business more realistically and successfully with a market-oriented agricultural policy. Such a policy is based on fact, not theory. It results from lessons painfully learned from the past, and a hard-nosed look at the present and future. In today's global market, we should not cut acreage to raise farm prices. Nor can we politically guarantee farm prices floors above what the international market will bear. Nor can we use government storage for farm products when market prices do not equal the guaranteed loan prices. These tactics simply don't work in today's world. Obviously, turning farm policy nearly 180 degrees around is not an easy task. But the results for U.S. agriculture will be well worth it.

Compounding, and sometimes confounding, farmers' woes is a plethora of rapid-fire advances in science and technology. Some make farmers' work easier and more efficient, like computers and conservation tillage. Some, on the other hand, make life far too costly and complex. One common dilemma is the temptation of expensive, ultra-modern farm machinery, where cheaper and more traditional equipment might suffice. Another dilemma is of the too-much-of-a-good-thing variety. Farmers have their pick of near-miraculous ways to increase productivity. But when they use them, many times the result is surplus crops and prices that are under the cost of production.

So what we have here is an agricultural industry that feels the blows of economic hardships, the sting of worldwide trade competition, the hardships of lagging export sales, the disappointment of expensive yet ineffective farm programs, and the temptations and frustrations of science and technology.

And yet another problem is emerging. Paul Lasley, an Iowa State University rural sociologist, along with others, foresees another farm crisis in 20 years—this one predicated not by a lack of capital, but by a short crop of appropriately trained people. Enrollments in high school vocational agriculture courses and university agriculture programs have begun to

plummet, which means that when the survivors of current farm difficulties retire over the next few decades, there could be a shortage of technically proficient new farmers to take over. In fact, Jo Ann Smith, the president of the National Cattlemen's Association, recently said in a speech that she would not encourage young people to go into ranching. It's a sad state of affairs when someone so thoughtful and well-respected in her industry feels compelled to make such a statement.

So where do we go from here? That's where agricultural communicators fit in. We have the ability—and the responsibility—to help agriculture clear the hurdles that bar its path. While we don't have a magic wand, we do have the power of the pen—or, more likely, word processor—to develop clear and concise information out of the mountains of economic and technical data farmers so desperately need.

It's true we no longer have the luxury of large staffs and unlimited resources. (I might add that this is not solely a phenomenon of the present administration.) We, like everyone else, have to do our part to bring the economy back to health. We also do not have the luxury of limitless time and energy to grouse about our lot. We simply have to get on with our very important task.

I don't work at the state level, so I can't make a blanket statement. But I can honestly tell you that at the federal level, we haven't cut back to the point of damaging the agriculture community. To me, this says there was some fat that needed trimming. It also says that innovation and creativity are our real allies, not numbers. We can accomplish so much with what we have, and do even more good than we could in the past.

We have two things in our favor. First, while the agriculture situation may be complex, it's not incomprehensible. With knowledge comes understanding. And who is in a better position to understand agriculture than agriculture communication specialists?

The second thing that can help us—that is, if we don't let it intimidate us—is technology. Let me use USDA's Office of Information to illustrate how the various parts of an information team can harness new technologies. In the seven divisions of the office, virtually none are unaffected by the changing face of communications. Our most recent venture—a new computerized information service—will be inaugurated July 1. USDA contracted with Martin Marietta Data Systems to

release electronically, from a single point, all "perishable" USDA news releases and reports. This will respond to the agricultural community's need for immediate one-set access to such information.

A broadcast parallel to the computerized system is teleconferencing. It's faster and cheaper than some other methods, and it lessens our dependency on a small number of media to digest and distribute our information. This has its up and its down side. The benefit is that USDA is not subject to the narrow focus of a core group of jaded reporters—and, of course, this benefits both the news media and the public. But there's a danger too, and that's the ability this gives us to propagandize our point of view to a less sophisticated, less cynical press. It's a delicate balance we will most diligently keep.

In addition to these techniques, we're using satellite distribution of video programs to the exclusion of time-consuming and costly tape duplicating and mailing. We're using computerized graphics in our design division. We're using new methods in film processing and slide and film production. We've installed word processors and computers in every division to maximize the efficiency of the printed page and the effectiveness of management. While near-term these technological adaptations are often confusing, intimidating, and vexing, in the long run they will make more information available to more people, more quickly.

What's going on now in communication is akin to the popularization of television in the 1950's. The TV industry grew to almost full size in just one decade. Then, in 1963, TV became the dominant medium, and has steadily increased its lead ever since. According to a recent report of the Roper Organization, TV continues to be the number one source of information on Presidential elections, Congressional elections, and statewide elections, and it rivals newspapers as a source of information on local elections. TV is pervasive—and, as many parents will mournfully attest—eminently attractive to children. It has been estimated that, by the age of 20, the average young person has watched 20,000 hours of television—more time than he or she has spent in the classroom.

But, as much as today's communication revolution can be likened to the coming-of-age of television, there is something

markedly different about it. Rather than seizing on broadcasting as the dominant theme, today's communicators look more and more to "narrowcasting," or, as scholar and social critic Alvin Toffler calls it, "de-massification." The theory of de-massification is that society is no longer—if it ever was—a uniform, homogeneous mass. It is increasingly diversifying, and this can be observed everywhere: from the job market to the supermarket. De-massification is especially apparent in the media. Large newspaper dailies are losing their readership to smaller papers with more narrow audiences. Weeklies, biweeklies, and the "shoppers," which provide highly localized news and advertising, are getting a firm grip on the market. Mass magazines are giving way to smaller circulation, more specialized magazines. Radio stations, too, single out specific audiences. There are, for example, "all talk" stations, "all music" stations, country, Jewish, and Portuguese stations. And even television, the high priest of mass media, segments its audience through cable, public television, and, indirectly, video cassette recorders.

You would think it would be quite difficult to ignore these trends. But in fact, most of us do, every day, because we haven't yet become accustomed to change and all that it brings. I'd like to propose that we accept de-massification and the new technologies wholeheartedly. And that we not just talk about applying them sometime in the nebulous future, but instead start applying them today when agriculture most needs our help. Because, quite frankly, we won't be doing our best possible work if we don't use the best possible means available to us.

Besides the techniques I already mentioned, let me suggest a few others. The first, and I think, most important, involves the distribution of press releases, publications, and other printed materials. Once upon a time we could blame the U.S. Postal Service for the foul-ups, bleeps, and blunders of our mailing efforts. Today we might even get away with blaming computers for losing or garbling our lists. But the real responsibility lies with us, the people who assemble those lists in the first place. Last month at the ACE/GPA meeting in Washington, I served on a panel with Tom Palmer, a policy analyst with the Cato Institute, who earlier had written a scathing criticism of USDA's information program. In his presentation, Palmer said something I will never forget—and

that is, that mountains of inappropriate and unwanted mail regularly cross his desk. Now, if there is one thing I do not relish, it's the thought of a USDA press release announcing new slaughter inspection standards finding its way into Palmer's hands. I'm sure you have similar trepidations about mailing lists gone awry.

The point is this: every press release, publication, and other piece of writing has a specific audience it is meant to address. (If it was written without that in mind, well, there's another problem.) For that reason alone, it is imperative to see that each piece makes its way to that intended target. We can do that with the help of personal contacts, directories, mailing list and distribution services, and so on. But whatever method we choose, we've simply got to use it.

Something else I see a great need for is increased cooperation between information subgroups. Just as society has become diversified, so have our information efforts. We can try new techniques and approaches for reaching one or more of our audiences, but somehow, when it comes to dealing with each other, we're often hopelessly out of touch. What we need is a cohesive effort to work more closely with coworkers, as well as those down the hall, in government agencies, in the states, at universities, and elsewhere. The object? To amass the expertise and the resources to get the job done, so we can act as a cohesive unit—not like so many slices of salami.

This brings me to contracting, another inevitable, yet attractive, alternative available to us. It's already happening now. Government, and I suspect, university people will do less creation of information programs on their own and more contracting. That's simply because changes in technology mean we cannot afford the necessary equipment or training as things become more and more specialized. There is the danger, I suppose, that in some instances creative people will be relegated to the role of contract officer. But we certainly don't have to let that happen.

And finally, something I'm beginning to see, and would like to see more of, is an enlightened perspective on the part of information managers. The days of the dictatorial manager are long gone, though unfortunately, some vestiges do remain. In order to coax the very best out of their staffs, information managers must be aware of individual differences and

needs. And they need to meld those creative talents and abilities in the most constructive way.

Agriculture stands at the edge of a new frontier. It can either stagger and topple backward, or move purposefully and confidently forward. I wish it were as easy to say it's all up to us. But I can say that if we set our sights on agriculture's frontier while methodically pioneering our own, we can't help but make a difference.